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# On this side of the Alps: a sociolinguistic overview of Francoprovençal in northwestern Italy

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**Abstract:** This contribution offers a sociolinguistic overview of Francoprovençal (FP) in northwestern Italy. Some aspects of the vitality of FP in Piedmont and Valle d'Aosta, as well as the linguistic repertoires of the two communities, are outlined in the first part of the article, while a selection of phenomena arising from contact between FP and Piedmontese is discussed in the second.

**Keywords:** Francoprovençal, Piedmontese, language contact, Piedmont, Valle d'Aosta

## 1 Introduction

This article provides a sociolinguistic overview of Francoprovençal (FP) on the Italian side of the Alps, in northwestern Italy. FP is spoken in Piedmont (south to north, from the upper Val Sangone to the Valle dell'Orco, in the province of Turin) and in Valle d'Aosta. After presenting some diagnostic parameters of the vitality of FP, the relationship between FP and the other languages of the repertoire is taken into account (Section 2). Since FP is spoken alongside Italian and Piedmontese (P) in Piedmont, and Italian, French and P in Valle d'Aosta, it comes as no surprise that the long-term contact between FP and these languages has resulted in much interference. Of particular interest is the contact between FP and P, both languages with a minority status in relation to Italian and French. Some examples from the FP/P contact situation are thus presented and discussed in Section 3.

## 2 Vitality and typology of linguistic repertoires

As the average elevation of FP-speaking villages is almost 750 meters above sea level in Piedmont and more than 950 meters in the Vallée, we are undoubtedly

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dealing with Alpine communities. If we endorsed the view that the higher the location of a village, the higher its degree of depopulation and the greater the endangerment to the *patois*<sup>1</sup> (Telmon 1979/1980; Berruto 2009a), we would be forced to conclude that FP of Piedmont (FPP) is a very endangered language and that FP of Valle d'Aosta (FPA) is even more endangered than FPP. Yet the evaluation scores of vitality calculated for FPP and FPA provide a different picture; Zulato et al. (this issue) provide 1.5 and 3.5 as overall vitality scores<sup>2</sup> for FPP and FPA respectively (slightly different scores – 1.6 and 3.7 – are proposed by Berruto [2009b: 343]).

Why is FPA so much “healthier” than FPP? As pointed out by Telmon (1997: 1331), the valleys of Piedmont and Valle d'Aosta suffered the same fate until World War II, representing agrarian economies in Alpine areas in relentless decay; the Alpine population was therefore forced to move away. Hence, until the mid twentieth century, the correlation between elevation above sea level, depopulation, and language endangerment seemed to hold true. However, a turning point occurred in 1948, when Valle d'Aosta was granted *Statuto Speciale* [Special Charter] status to help stem the migratory trend. Economic policies focusing on weaker areas improved agriculture, tourism, industry (especially near the administrative centre of Aosta) and commerce; as a consequence, though the drain of FP speakers did not come to a stop, its speed was reduced. Moreover, the current presence of some “new speakers”, namely those who have voluntarily learnt a variety of FPA by attending e.g. a language course, appears significant (Dunoyer 2010; see also Bichurina, this issue; Dunoyer, this issue; Kasstan and Müller, this issue).

A survey conducted in 2001 by the Fondation Chanoux reports that 47% of the population in Valle d'Aosta claim to know a variety of FP well or very well, while according to the IRES survey (2005–2006), this is reduced to 23.8% in Piedmont (Allasino et al. 2007: 69). On the basis of such data, though not completely comparable,<sup>3</sup> we can try to evaluate the absolute number of speakers of FPP and FPA. The inhabitants of Valle d'Aosta on 1 January 2001 in the 12–80-year-old tier numbered 102,536 (source: ISTAT), the Fondation Chanoux survey concerning the whole of the municipalities of the Vallée (N=74); it can thus be inferred that, at that time, 48,192 individuals knew a variety of FP well or very well. Moreover, we can argue that a good part of the population over 80 years old knew a variety of FP well or very well (5,209 individuals), thus bringing the total of FP speakers to more than 50,000. As for the FP-speaking area of Piedmont, the

<sup>1</sup> The label *patois* is used here following the habits of most FP speakers.

<sup>2</sup> Based on the UNESCO factors. For the calculation of values, see again Zulato et al. (this issue).

<sup>3</sup> The Fondation Chanoux survey involved interviewees from 12 to 80 years old (N=3,655), while in the IRES survey the interviewees were over 18 years old (N=1,026).

43 localities taken into account by the IRES survey (see Allasino et al. 2007: 5) had, on 1 January 2006, 57,117 inhabitants over 18 years old (source: ISTAT); among them, 13,594 could speak FP. Given that people under 18 years old are not the most typical *patois* speakers, it seems reasonable to round off the total number of speakers to no more than 15,000 individuals. Note, however, that the IRES survey included only the villages whose *patois* had been considered, up to 2005/2006, worthy of protection by National Law 482, *Norme in materia di tutela delle minoranze linguistiche storiche* [Norms in defence of historical linguistic minorities], approved on 15 December 1999. Law 482/99 is based on the principle of so-called *autodeterminazione* [self-determination], whereby a village’s adherence to a “historical minority language” is adopted by the Province Council at the request of 15% of the local inhabitants, or of one-third of the members of its local Council. No support from a pool of experts is required in order to ascertain the actual suitability of such belonging. It often happens that some villages are protected by the law and considered the site of a “historical minority language” when in fact no minority languages are still, or ever have been, spoken in their territory; it is, in contrast, rare that the localities in which a minority language is spoken do not fall under the protection of Law 482/99. The FP minority in Piedmont displays both cases. Among the 43 localities investigated by the IRES, while at least 5 are not FP-speaking, 14 villages that are FP-speaking have been ignored in the survey (see Allasino et al. 2007: 28), because prior to 2005–2006 they did not request to be acknowledged as “historical linguistic minorities”. According to the Regione Piemonte website, 50 villages are now regarded as belonging to the FP minority in Piedmont; that is to say that seven localities (including the non-FP-speaking community of Avigliana) have been added to the above-mentioned 43 villages. All of the non-FP-speaking villages surveyed by the IRES are still protected as “historical minority languages” by Italian law.

All in all, it would be fair to estimate that about 60,000–65,000 speakers of FP are currently living in Valle d’Aosta and western Piedmont. This figure does not include speakers of FP living outside of their native area (e.g. in such cities/towns as Turin, Ivrea, etc.), for which statistical data are completely lacking.

Both FPP and FPA are spoken in multilingual contexts involving more than two codes. As for the FP-speaking valleys of Piedmont, their repertoire can be illustrated as in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Linguistic repertoire of the Francoprovençal-speaking valleys of Piedmont.

Italian is located in the High (H) position, while P and FP share the Low (L) position, P having, however, a higher (h) sociolinguistic status than FP (l) (Telmon 1994: 928; Berruto 2009a: 16). There is no sharp division of function between Italian and P/FP, as in prototypical diglossic situations (Ferguson 1959); it is in fact quite normal that Italian is used in informal settings, and that code-switching phenomena occur between Italian and P/FP. When “both the H variety and the L variety are used (at least by one sector or by groups of the population) in ordinary conversation” (Berruto 1989: 560), we are dealing with a form of attenuated diglossia, which Berruto terms *dilalia*. The fuzzy boundaries between the codes of the repertoire are represented by a dotted line in Figure 1: a thick dotted line splits Italian from the L codes (P/FP), and a thin dotted line is placed between P and FP. This means that Italian can also be used in low domains and that the functions of P and FP are roughly interchangeable. Note, however, that the boundary between Italian and the L codes is marked by a dotted line when the vantage point is that of Italian; if we adopt the perspective of the L codes, the boundary with Italian is marked by a continuous line, stressing the fact that in a dilalic situation the codes in the L position are not generally employed in high domains. This relationship between codes can be defined as “one-way permeability”.

The typical repertoire in Valle d’Aosta can be depicted as in Figure 2.<sup>4</sup>



**Figure 2:** Linguistic repertoire of Valle d’Aosta.

The overall situation in Valle d’Aosta is dilalic, revealing the same features as the repertoire outlined in Figure 1 (Telmon 1994: 928; Berruto 2003: 47). Yet, the H position is here shared by Italian and French, and the hierarchy between FP and P is inverted with respect to that of Figure 1, FP and P being (h) and (l) respectively, though again functionally interchangeable (thin dotted line between FP and P). An institutional Italian/French bilingualism was ratified by the *Statuto Speciale* in 1948; since then, both languages have held official status, the square brackets indicating that French is, however, far less used than Italian for everyday purposes (cf. Puolato 2006: 127–130). The Fondation Chanoux survey has nevertheless shown that 56% of the interviewees consider the

<sup>4</sup> Different areas of Valle d’Aosta have (slightly) different types of repertoire (Berruto 2003). I do not consider here the Walser-speaking minority (see Dal Negro and Angster, this issue).

knowledge of French to be an important or fundamental feature of their local identity; according to the same survey, only 0.99% claim that French is their mother tongue, as opposed to the 71.5% who declare their mother tongue to be Italian. The square-bracketing of P means that its use is now very reduced and limited to the Basse Vallée (Telmon 1994: 928; Bauer 2000; 2008: 269–274).

The decay of P in Valle d'Aosta was already attested in a survey conducted by Bauer in the years 1985–1988; for example, only 5.1% of Bauer's interviewees (N=39) still used P in shopping transactions in the P-speaking town of Ivrea (Turin), while 76.9% of them preferred to speak in Italian, and 15.9% Italian and P together (Bauer 2000: 124, 130). It is perhaps telling that no speaker under the age of 45 claimed to use P, or Italian and P together, in such transactions. The situation was completely different at the end of the nineteenth century, when Abbot Cerlogne (1907: 6) worried that “[l]e dialecte [FP] plus coulant, dominant dans la Vallée, aura alors tout envahi. Sauf que, par manque de patriotisme, ne soit envahi lui-même par le piémontais, qui tend à se populariser dans notre vallée” [the easiest, i.e. most corrupted, form of the dialect, which is now dominating the Vallée, will have by then invaded the entire area. Unless, for lack of patriotism, this very form of the dialect will be submerged by P, which is being more and more used in our valley (my translation)]. With the approval of the so-called Rattazzi Law (1859), and up until 1927, Aosta came under the jurisdiction of Turin; this state of affairs encouraged the diffusion of P, which was then considered a higher code than FP, thanks to its link to the political and economic centre of Turin. With the rise of the Fascist regime in Italy (in the 1920s), the use of French was all but ousted and the local *patois* underwent a strong regression. The loss of prestige of P also became evident, a regional language being inconsistent with the new nationalist ideology (Bauer 2008: 271). At the end of the 1950s, the cattle markets were one of the few domains in which P was still used in the Vallée (Keller 1959: 138).

### 3 Languages in contact: Provençal and Francoprovençal

It is not at all unexpected that the multilingual repertoires just sketched display an ideal background for contact phenomena to occur. Within this wealth of language contact possibilities, we discuss hereinafter some examples of mutual interference between FP and P. This choice is grounded in the observation that both FP and P are *linguae minores* (though only FP is recognized as such by Italian law), and that the dynamics of language contact between minority

languages are far less studied than those between a *lingua minor* and its superposed standard language (as, in this instance, Italian and/or French).

Before tackling this subject, a short historical introduction to P is needed. First, the label “Piemontese” has a number of meanings. It can be used to refer to a specific variety of P (e.g. the P variety of Monferrato), to all P varieties (i.e. P as opposed to Lombard, Ligurian etc.), or to the Turinese-based regional koiné (“common P”). While sketching the repertoires in which FPP and FPA are involved, I have to a certain extent exploited this semantic ambiguity: there “P” is used to refer to both a specific variety of P and the Turinese-based regional koiné, given that the FP area borders on the Canavese, where a specific variety of P is spoken (Canavesano), and on the roughly Turinese-speaking plain to the south-east. The influence of Turinese, however, extended well beyond the area with which it was directly in contact. In fact, Turin conveyed an urban variety of unquestionable prestige, since it had first been the capital of the Duchy of Savoy (1563 >), then the capital of the Kingdom of Sardinia (1720 >), and finally the capital of a unified Italy (1861–1864). On account of this outstanding position, especially from the eighteenth century onwards, Turinese began affecting the other varieties of P; it was at the head of a process of geographical diffusion, with many features of Turinese being adopted by the surrounding varieties (Cerruti and Regis 2014: 94–95). In this scenario, the Canavese area was an exception, in that for the most part it preserved its linguistic appearance: before World War II, competence in the regional dialect was merely passive (Grassi 1989: 239), and only Canavesano and Italian were present in the repertoire. As a consequence, in the FP-speaking valleys of Piedmont, the contact with P was mainly a matter of contact with Canavesano; note, however, that this statement holds true for such valleys as Lanzo, Orco and Soana but not for the southernmost valleys (Susa and Sangone), which are adjacent to an area in which Turinese-based varieties are still spoken. With regard to Valle d’Aosta, both Canavesano and the regional koiné were used as *langues véhiculaires* from the valley bottom up to Aosta (Berruto 1983: 85). As mentioned above, Canavesano is in contact with FPA as a bordering variety, while the presence of the regional koiné was mainly due to the linguistic habits of Turinese bureaucracy. At any rate, the influence of P on FPA seems to be quite recent, since P borrowings were first attested on the eve of the Unification of Italy, both in French and in the FP varieties of the Basse Vallée and of Courmayeur (Bauer 1999: 224–225).

### 3.1 Lexis

The lexical relationship between P and Gallo-Romance (i.e., in the most classic view of Romance linguistics, French, Occitan and FP) is a vexing question. After

considering 54 lexical types that P shares with Gallo-Romance varieties, Simon (1967: 59) concludes that Piedmont is a “Sammelbecken galloromanischer Relikte” [“receptacle of Gallo-Romance relics”]. This statement is correct but at the same time misleading. It would be wrong to think that Occitan and FP varieties were once spoken in the plains of Piedmont, but it is true that in previous centuries some features, now restricted to Gallo-Romance, had a wider (and further easterly) extension. It is therefore difficult, in some cases, to determine whether a given word is a genuine reflex of Latin or a borrowing from a Gallo-Romance variety, and in the latter case whether the borrowing is from French, Occitan or FP. Phonology may sometimes help, and the presence or lack of a borrowing routine can be an important clue. For example, there is no need to postulate that P *ciòca*, [ˈtʃoka], ‘bell’ is a borrowing from French *cloche*, [klɔʃ], instead of a reflex of Latin *\*clocca*; if it were a word of French origin, we would expect such results as *\*clòca*, [ˈklɔka], or *\*clòsa*, [ˈklɔsa], following the rule that, in loanwords from French, [kl] remains intact,<sup>5</sup> while [ʃ] is adapted as [tʃ]/[s].<sup>6</sup> On the contrary, P *arbëna* ‘white partridge’ can be regarded as a bona fide loanword from FP, thanks not to phonology in this instance, but to two other available clues: the white partridge is an Alpine species, and the lexical type *arben* is only attested in FPP and FPA (ALEPO<sup>7</sup> III-I-104; Chenal and Vautherin 1997: 107; see also REP: 66). In contrast, we cannot be sure about the origin of P *malëzzu*, [maˈlœzu] ‘larch’ (It. *larice*). The REP (905–906) regards it as a French borrowing of uncertain etymology, but given the fact that French *mêlèze* is probably a loanword itself from Delphinian Occitan *melese* (FEW 6/1: 654a; TLFi, u. *mêlèze*), that the larch is an Alpine plant, and that the same lexical type is well attested in Cisalpine varieties of FP and Occitan (Tuaillon 2002: 112–114; ALEPO I-I-140), we cannot rule out the hypothesis that the word entered P through Occitan or FP. We are thus left with an undetermined Gallo-Romance influence.

After revising and integrating data from Levi (1927) with those from the FEW, Gebhardt (1978: 35–37) picks out 48 borrowings from FP into P, including, among others, *ciassil* ‘window framework’, *crucetè* ‘to hook’, *cuciùn* ‘bowls’, *geta* ‘burdock’, *menagèra* ‘short apron’, *muflu* ‘slap’, and *ratèla* ‘mousetrap’. This figure is probably too high, since his blind faith in the FEW sometimes has led Gebhardt to reach incorrect, or at least questionable, conclusions. For instance,

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. P *clarineta*, [klariˈneta], ‘clarinet’ < French *clarinette*, [klariˈnɛt], or P *clissé*, [kliˈsɛ] ‘ cliché, stereotype’ < French *cliché*, [kliˈʃe].

<sup>6</sup> See e.g. P *aprucé*, [apruˈtʃe] ‘to approach’ / *aprusè*, [apruˈsɛ] < French *approcher*, [apʁɔˈʃe], or again P *clissé* < French *cliché*.

<sup>7</sup> See References for details.



P *brïoss* ‘sweet roll, pastry’ is included in the list of Francoprovençalisms on the basis of a form, *beriosse*, collected in Faucigny (Haute Savoie), from which P would have borrowed its term (FEW, 15/1: 269b, 270b, N17). This claim is made apodictically, the relationship between Faucigny and Piedmont not being clearly defined; moreover, it seems phonetically unjustified, P *brïoss*, [brjɔs], being the usual adaptation of French *brioche*, [briɔʃ], with the passage of French [ʃ] > P [s].

Let us now tackle the other side of the problem, the influence of P on FP. It is undeniable that P has affected FP in certain lexical areas. This trend is clearly shown by Grassi (1971: 88–89), who lists a group of P words which have penetrated the FP variety of Champorcher (lower Valle d’Aosta) and which are limited to specific domains: (a) the names of professions – *panati* ‘baker’ < P *panatè*; *mazlé* ‘butcher’ < P *mazlé*; *feré* ‘smith’ < P *fré* – and (b) the names of some metals, work tools and specific objects – *ara* ‘copper’ < P *aram*; *tula* ‘metal sheet’ < P *tola*; *caréja* ‘chair’ < Canavesano *caréa*, etc. A lexical opposition exists between upper and lower Valle d’Aosta (Favre 1995; Favre 2002), but fully grasping this opposition is not easy. The influence of P seems to have a sort of socio-cultural specialization which “nous empêche d’attribuer sans plus à l’action du piémontais toute concordance linguistique entre la basse vallée d’Aoste et la plaine” [prevents us from definitively assigning to P every linguistic coincidence between lower Valle d’Aosta and the plain] (Grassi 1971: 89). The area of lower Valle d’Aosta is the most exposed to P but also displays conservative features. Favre (2002: 193) pinpoints some lexical divergence between the Basse Vallée and the Haute Vallée as in Table 1.

Generally speaking, the Basse Vallée reveals an Italo-Romance orientation (first and second columns), while the Haute Vallée conforms to Gallo-Romance (fifth column). Are we to consider the words listed in the third column (Basse Vallée) as straightforward borrowings from P? Phonology provides no assistance in this case, except for *amatsé* and *sénota*, which can hardly be considered adapted borrowings from P *massé* and *snistra*. As a rule, when any other evidence is lacking, I do not believe that we can say that each and every FP word having a

Table 1: Lexis in upper and lower Valle d’Aosta (Favre 2002, adapted).

Italian	P	FPA (Basse Vallée)	FPA (Haute Vallée)	French	Gloss
<i>ciabattino</i>	<i>ciavatìn</i>	<i>tsavatìn</i>	<i>cordognì</i>	<i>cordonnier</i>	‘cobbler’
<i>osare</i>	<i>ancalé</i>	<i>entchalà</i>	<i>ozé</i>	<i>oser</i>	‘to dare’
<i>sarto</i>	<i>sartùr</i>	<i>sartoù</i>	<i>tailleur</i>	<i>tailleur</i>	‘tailor’
<i>zio</i>	<i>barba</i>	<i>barba</i>	<i>lavón</i>	<i>oncle</i>	‘uncle’
<i>ammazzare</i>	<i>massé</i>	<i>amatsé</i>	<i>tchoué</i>	<i>tuer</i>	‘to kill’
<i>sinistra</i>	<i>snistra</i>	<i>sénota</i>	<i>gotse</i>	<i>gauche</i>	‘left’



P correspondent is a loanword from the latter to the former, just as we cannot say that, e.g., *cordognè* is certainly a borrowing from French *cordonnier*: every word has its own history, and we have to try to retrace it as far as possible before drawing any conclusions. It is nevertheless true that, as suggested by Grassi (1971: 90), P can sometimes contribute to preserving “des couches linguistiques gallo-romanes les plus anciennes le long de la zone de contact actuelle” [some of the oldest layers of Gallo-Romance along the present contact area].

## 3.2 Phonology

The phenomenon of “accent progression” (It. *progressione dell'accento*), i.e. the displacement of the tonic accent to the subsequent syllable, occurs in different ways, two of which are typical of FP, though not covering the whole area (e.g. Tuaillon 1972: 377–380). I am here referring to the types [lna] “moon” (1) and [ly 'na] (2) (<Latin LŪNA), in which the accent displacement can be associated (1) or not (2) with the loss of the (originally) stressed vowel. Both types are attested in the FP-speaking valleys of Piedmont: type (1) appears in the varieties of Valle Soana (Zörner 2004: 66), while type (2) occurs in the varieties of Valle dell'Orco (Zörner 2003: 60), upper Valli di Lanzo (Terracini 1910/1913: 346–351), and lower Valle Susa (Telmon 2001: 76). Beyond the Alps, type (1) is widespread to the east of Geneva and in Haute Savoie, while type (2) is present in Haute Maurienne and near Grenoble (Tuaillon 1972: 379). Neither type is documented in FPA. The interesting fact about these dynamics of accent displacement is that they also occur in Canavesano – see such examples as [fta] ‘thick’ (feminine singular) <FĪCTA (type 1) and [bu'ka] ‘mouth’ <BŪCCA (type 2) (Rossebastiano Bart 1984: 398, 401) – in an area delimited to the south by the Vauda and to the north-east by the provincial route which connects Turin to the Valli dell'Orco and Soana (Rossebastiano Bart 1984: 393). The boundary to the north-west is non-existent, dissolving into the FP-speaking area.

We may wonder whether “accent progression” is a Canavesano feature in FP or a FP feature in Canavesano. Telmon (2001: 76) defends the second hypothesis, since the phenomenon occurs not only in the valleys adjacent to Canavese, but also in Valle Susa and beyond the Alps; moreover, no other variety of P displays this phonetic evolution (except for some varieties in the area near Mondovì, which, however, offer only type (1) displacements in very restricted environments). At any rate, we cannot exclude that the maintenance of “accent progression” in both FP and Canavesano is a matter of reciprocal reinforcement; this would also explain why the phenomenon is far less common in the *patois* of Valle Susa, where the neighboring varieties of P do not show any kind of accent displacement.

A phonetic feature which, in this area, is peculiar to FP and Occitan of Valle di Susa is the voiced dental fricative [ð] as a reflex of (mainly) inter-vocalic -R- and -L-: see [albe'ðo] 'poplar' (FP variety of Giaglione: ALEPO I-I-189) < Late Latin *albaru*, [mo'ði] 'to die' (FP variety of Condove [Prato Botrile]: ALEPO III-I-328) < Latin *\*MÖRĪRE*, [si'ðoɲa] 'greater celandine' (FP variety of Giaglione: ALEPO I-II-181) < CHELIDŌNIA, [si'tuðo] 'sour dock' (Occitan variety of Chiomonte: ALEPO I-II-191) < Latin *ACĪDŪLU*, etc. Cerruti and Regis (2007: 27–32) show that, according to the ALEPO, the Occitan-speaking centre of Bardonecchia, located at the French border, tend to substitute this sound with the 'French' [ʀ], while the 'Italian/P' [r] is gaining ground in all the other villages, with the highest percentages of occurrence in FP-speaking Chianocco, Condove (Prato Botrile), Mattie, and Susa (S. Giuliano). We can suppose that the spread of [r] to the detriment of [ð] was first due to P, then spreading by way of Italian.

### 3.3 Morphology and morphosyntax

In both Occitan and FP, the 4th person ending of the present indicative is represented by [eŋ]/[əŋ], and can be stressed or unstressed. This ending contrasts with the P ending [uma] (-oma), of much debated origin (Zörner 1996), which is attested as first occurring at the beginning of the seventeenth century, in a variety close to Turinese (Telmon 2015: 70–72). Earlier non-Turinese texts consistently show such endings as -ema/-emo/-ena/-enna; the sole exception are the so-called *Sermoni Subalpini* [Subalpine Sermons] (12th or thirteenth century), which have -em, but whether or not they actually belong to P remains controversial (Clivio 2002: 22–23). Given the fact that in the texts collected by Biondelli (1853) the ending -oma had by then become common to almost all varieties of P, it is likely that this feature had Turin as its *centre irradiateur*, from which it moved as of the eighteenth century, imposing itself throughout the plain (even in the Lombard-speaking, northeastern part of the region).

The substantial homogeneity of this overall picture is interrupted by Canavesano, its ending [əŋ] (as in ['kantəŋ] '(we) sing': Zörner 1998: 87) overlapping with those of Gallo-Romance above. Since Canavesano is the sole variety of P to show a [əŋ] ending, it may be supposed that Gallo-Romance (i.e. FP) influenced Canavesano rather than the contrary. An alternative (weaker) interpretation could be that Canavesano preserves an archaic feature of P – granting, for the sake of argument, that the *Sermoni Subalpini* were a genuine P text – and that this feature has been maintained thanks to the nearby FP varieties. In both cases, the behavior of Canavesano proves its

astonishing impermeability to the innovations originating from Turin, even though Turin is only 40 kilometers away.

Concerning the influence of P on FPA, some morphosyntactic aspects have been discussed by Keller (1958) and Harris (1967). The use of determiners before possessives in FPA is of particular relevance, since it exemplifies the distinct behaviors of the regional koiné and Canavesano. As far as FPA is concerned, Keller (1958: 142) observes that in the lower valley the addition of articles before possessives is the rule, while in the upper valley they are optional. According to Keller, the categorical use of determiners before possessives in the Basse Vallée is an outcome of contact with P. Keller's claim is puzzling, since his main source, Aly-Belfâdel's (1933) P grammar, states that:

[g]eneralmente i possessivi rifiutano l'articolo definito al singolare [...]; ma lo pigliano al plurale [...]. Non è però raro affatto l'uso, presso certe persone, dell'articolo definito al singolare e della mancanza di esso al plurale

[generally, singular possessives take definite articles; but plural possessives require them. It is, however, not unusual at all that some people use definite articles with singular possessives but not with plural possessives].

(Aly-Belfâdel 1933: 144)

Aly-Belfâdel depicts an unstable system, closer to that of the Haute Vallée than to that of the Basse Vallée. Yet Keller's hypothesis is not as ill-grounded as it appears; the use of determiners before possessives is probably a product of language contact, but not a matter of contact with Turinese, i.e., the variety described in Aly-Belfâdel's grammar. Zörner (1998: 64–65) states that the use of determiners before possessives is compulsory in Canavesano, except before the names of relatives (singular form): e.g. *əl nost aspeč* 'our mirror', lit. 'the our mirror' / *i nöst aspeč* 'our mirrors', lit. 'the our mirrors', but *nos küñá* 'our brother-in-law' / *i nös küñé* 'our brothers-in-law', lit. 'the our brothers-in-law'. It is thus very likely that Canavesano, rather than the regional koiné, has played a role in the spread of the "determiner + possessive" construction in the *patois* of the Basse Vallée. The use found in Canavesano is roughly comparable to that of contemporary Italian (*il nostro specchio*, *nostro cognato*); however, Italian requires the use of determiners before 6th person possessives, even when the singular form of the names of relatives is involved, as in *il loro cognato*, lit. 'the their brother-in-law', versus Canavesano *so küñá*.

In sum, whereas P – the varieties of the Canavese area as well as the once prestigious Turinese-based koiné – has affected the lexis and structures of FP, FP has influenced the phonetics and morphology of the P varieties of the Canavese area, a handful of FP words having also entered the Turinese-based koiné. The dynamics of language contact between FP and P are thus bidirectional, though

not displaying any of the outcomes generally associated with intense contact; the documented phenomena seem in fact to score no higher than the second category on Thomason and Kaufman's (1988: 74–95) borrowing scale, i.e. “slight structural borrowing”. It is after all significant that lexical borrowing is almost limited to “cultural borrowings”, namely “words for objects new to the culture [...], but also for new concepts”, or at least associated with a certain, “external” *milieu*, while core borrowings, namely “words that more or less duplicate already existing words in the L1” (Myers-Scotton 2002: 239), are rare.

It is, however, undeniable that we know very little about the *actual* language contact between FP and P. All but one of the cases discussed here concern the “language” side of contact (“language interference” in Weinreich's 1968 [1953] terms), or rather the replications which already belong to the language system and are shared by the whole community; in contrast, what is occurring on the “speech” side of contact (“speech interference”), i.e., language contact as it happens, is still a matter of speculation. It is perhaps interesting that the only dynamic of “speech interference” observed is that of the ongoing substitution of the voiced dental fricative [ð] with the alveolar trill [r] in the *patois* of Valle di Susa, and that this change, though probably triggered by P, is now mainly driven by Italian. Nor can we exclude that the use of possessives in the Basse Vallée, formerly modelled on Canavesano, is now being reinforced by Italian.

## 4 Conclusions

Both FPP and FPA are endangered, but to different degrees. The latter turns out to be much healthier (i.e., demographically stronger, more widespread) than the former. It is worth noting that, while FPA is a first-degree minority language, FPP is a second-degree minority language; in other words, FPA is a minority language with respect to Italian/French (1st level), while FPP is a minority language with respect to P (1st level), which, in turn, is a minority language with respect to Italian (2nd level). P is itself a second-degree minority language in Valle d'Aosta, with respect to both FP (1st level) and Italian/French (2nd level). In the long run, this double-level superposition is doomed to become oppressive, as is somewhat confirmed by the waning health of both FPP and P in Valle d'Aosta.

The dynamics of language contact between FP and P can be interpreted as another piece of the puzzle. While we may wonder whether contact between FP and P can still be observed *in vivo* or not, the overall impression is that this contact is somewhat dormant, both FP and P lacking at present the strength to influence each other. The only certainty is that the key player in the game is now Italian.

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